

# THE BIN LADEN EFFECT

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*The attacks on September 11, 2001 will likely never fade from our collective memory. It was the most devastating attack by a foreign adversary ever to take place on US soil, and a turning point in the way people with brown skin are treated in the US and world at large. This essay posits that these attacks absolutely would not have happened without Osama bin Laden funding them and pushing for their execution. This makes him one of the most important people in several decades (if not the most important) in terms of influencing the way that Muslims, and those presenting as Muslim are treated. This essay also examines the myriad effects of these attacks and by extension bin Laden's effect on US foreign policy.*

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The attacks of September 11, 2001 left an impact that may never totally dissipate. They were the defining moment for Americans of several generations; to anyone too young to have seen the breaking news of a presidential assassination, these attacks conveyed the same amount of shock. They changed the way the average American viewed Muslims and people of Arab descent and altered US foreign and domestic policy considerably. This also changed the quality of life for Muslims and those of Arab descent drastically, affecting many aspects of countless people's lives. By extension, Osama bin Laden, the man who funded and planned these attacks, is one of, if not the most, influential persons in terms of affecting the way Americans view Islam and Muslims, as well as on US policy in the last several decades. While Khalid Sheikh Mohammad came up with the initial plan for the attacks, and eventually executed said attacks, bin Laden changed Mohammad's ideas to suit his own agenda, and controlled every step of the planning, generally not even bothering to consult anyone else, and usually ignoring them if he did not like what they had to say. <sup>1</sup> Bin Laden even chose who would pilot the planes

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<sup>1</sup>Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, 84.

without consulting Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, valuing those who were loyal to him above all else.<sup>2</sup>

Someone who knew him well during the Afghanistan war in Sudan described bin Laden as “a one man show.”<sup>3</sup> It seems as though this was the case for most of his life. Born into an enormous family (his father, Muhammad bin Laden’s company was worth over two billion dollars by the time Osama was born),<sup>4</sup> he grew into a tall, charismatic leader accustomed to getting his own way. This explains why when some senior members of the Taliban tried to warn him about how dangerous it could be to directly attack the US, bin Laden told them, “I will make it happen even if I do it by myself.”<sup>5</sup> Bin Laden had generally had things in life go his way, so it stands to reason from his point of view that his plan would be successful and create a tidal wave of Muslim holy rage to push the now quaking American infidels out of the Middle East for good. So when other, more rabid followers told him what he wanted to hear, that the US had lost its warrior mentality and would break after a couple good terror attacks, Osama decided to do what he did best: ignore dissenters and carry on with his plan. Osama thought that should the US dare to invade Afghanistan, an army of Muslim recruits would rise up against them, as well as the Taliban and various smaller organizations within the nation rising to protect their leader in the fight against tyranny.<sup>6</sup> In retrospect this was a severe miscalculation, and one Osama likely made due to his own false correlation.

In 1980, Osama got a degree in civil engineering from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and within a few years he had joined in organizing the fight against the occupying Russians.<sup>7</sup> Looking forward to him planning the attacks on the US and one can see some parallels. Osama viewed both the US and former USSR as colonialist, infidel superpowers, and equated fighting one with fighting the other. Ignoring that fighting a guerilla war against occupiers in one’s own country is not nearly the same as a generally unprovoked attack that kills thousands of civilians. Osama once said that the attacks on the World Trade Center went better than he had ever imagined,<sup>8</sup> but in a big way they failed. From average Muslims to extremists, Bin-Laden’s plot had generally failed to convince Muslims that it was religiously legitimate to target civilians.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Gerges, 86.

<sup>3</sup>Gerges, 91.

<sup>4</sup>Williams, *Al Qaeda: Brotherhood of Terror*, 92.

<sup>5</sup>Gerges, 90.

<sup>6</sup>Gerges, 92.

<sup>7</sup>Williams, 94.

<sup>8</sup>Gerges, 84.

<sup>9</sup>Gerges, 94.

In countless other unanticipated ways the plot was a huge success. The easiest way to radicalize people to your cause is to have them feel hated, cast out by the society you want them to join the fight against. This was very much the case following September 11<sup>th</sup> for anyone in America who looked like they might be vaguely Middle Eastern. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Research Institute (ADC) reported that complaints of discrimination against Arab Americans increased fourfold between Sept and Oct of 2001.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, reports of religious discrimination against Muslims filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) more than doubled in the months following 9/11.<sup>11</sup> Arab, Afghan, Iranian and Pakistani men experienced a significant decline in wages compared to non-Hispanic whites post 9/11, and the research that determined this found there were no visible factors except ethnicity that could explain it.<sup>12</sup> Nearly 10 years after the attacks, hate crimes against Muslims remain five times what they were in the year 2000,<sup>13</sup> and in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, hate crimes against other minority groups actually went down, with the exception of a very small increase of hate crimes against Jews.<sup>14</sup> All of these actions act to disenfranchise and alienate people who otherwise might have had no reason to ever even consider joining an extremist organization.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks had a much larger impact than just on the lives of Muslims living within the US. Airlines have updated numerous safety features, the most obvious being reinforcing the cockpit door to not allow anyone to come in during a flight.<sup>15</sup> Since all the hijackers involved in the attacks were in the US with legally issued visas, obviously the visa application process has been revamped. In 2010 there were ten times as many visa denials over suspected terrorist links as there were in 2002.<sup>16</sup> Another huge development came on November 19, 2001 when the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA was created. This new government organization has an annual budget of roughly five billion dollars and employs an estimated 69,000 people.<sup>17</sup> The effects were certainly not limited to the US either. An attack of this magnitude demanded strong action from the President, and George W. Bush used this need for extreme action to put into place foreign policy allowing him to shape the world more to America's interests and making sure the conditions that made these attacks possible were eradicated for good.<sup>18</sup> By constantly referring to the attackers as pure evil and calling for an all-out war on

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<sup>10</sup>Dávila and Mora, "Changes in the Earnings of Arab Men," 587.

<sup>11</sup>Dávila and Mora, 588.

<sup>12</sup>Dávila and Mora, 587.

<sup>13</sup>Disha, Cavendish, and King, "Historical Events," 22.

<sup>14</sup>Disha, Cavendish, and King, 33.

<sup>15</sup>Riley, "Flight of Fancy," 151.

<sup>16</sup>Riley, 151.

<sup>17</sup>Riley, 152.

<sup>18</sup>McCartney, "American Nationalism," 400.

evil, Bush was able to parlay his invasion of Afghanistan into an invasion of Iraq. By calling Saddam Hussein evil he effectively equated him to the perpetrators of September 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>19</sup>

While showing all the effects of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terror attacks would take far more room than this paper allows, it should at least be clear that the effects were as far reaching as possible, and the attack was facilitated by Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden's control over the Taliban can be best illustrated from an incident in 1997, when the Clinton administration offered them international recognition in their newly taken Afghanistan and millions in foreign aid in exchange for Osama, and the Taliban flatly refused.<sup>20</sup> Before he had even linked up with the Taliban, after the government of Sudan persuaded Osama to leave and return to Afghanistan, a US diplomat said that "sending Osama bin Laden back into Afghanistan was like sending Lenin back into Russia. At least we could keep an eye on some of what he was doing in Sudan."<sup>21</sup> Osama's influence within Afghanistan dates back decades and no attack of this magnitude could ever have happened without his approval every step of the way.

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<sup>19</sup>McCartney, 400.

<sup>20</sup>Williams, 95.

<sup>21</sup>Williams, 96.

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